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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PHUM BO
SUBJECT: Narodnaya Volya Hits Rock Bottom

Refs: A) Minsk 300, B) Minsk 921

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A district court froze independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya's bank account and assets on September 27. The court also demanded it pay BYR 100 million damages awarded to a government official in a June lawsuit. With its account frozen and little time to collect the needed sum, Narodnaya Volya (NV) appealed to its readers for help. Within 24 hours, NV gathered 70 percent of the money and transferred it to the appropriate official. However, minutes after the transaction, a state-owned distributing company and three publishing houses annulled their contracts with NV without giving the required one-month notice. An NV journalist viewed the recent events as part of the GOB's plan to close NV and told Poloff that they would be able to print the September 29 and September 30 issues, but doubt they would be able to continue their work in October. End summary

¶2. (U) On September 27, the Minsk Leninsky District Court froze independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya's (circulation 30,000) bank account and assets, including the paper for printing. The freeze, according to the court, was to force NV to pay BYR 100 million in damages for allegedly defaming MP and Liberal Democratic Party leader Sergei Gaidukevich (reftels). The Minsk City Court threw out NV's appeal to pay the defamation charges on September 15 and did not notify the paper of the decision until September 19. Editor-in-Chief Joseph Seredich filed an appeal on September 23 at the Supreme Court and was awaiting a response when the district court froze NV's account.

¶3. (SBU) The court demanded NV pay the damages owed to Gaidukevich, but the newspaper had not been given a new deadline or time to collect the necessary amount. Seredich appealed to NV readers on September 27 for financial help and managed to collect over BYR 70 million (USD 32,500) by September 28. Svetlana Kalinkina of NV told Poloff in a September 29 phone conversation that a steady flow of businessmen, individuals, and pensioners came to NV headquarters to give donations.

¶4. (U) On September 28, literally minutes after NV transferred BYR 70 million to Gaidukevich, Belasoyuzpechat - Belarus' state monopoly of press kiosks and newsstands - notified NV that its distribution contract with Belasoyuzpechat would be annulled on October 1 because of NV's alleged violations of media law. Later in the day, the Minsk printing companies Krasnaya Zvezda and Minskgoroyuzpechat annulled its contract with NV. On September 29, Kalinkina notified Poloff that another publishing company, Minsk Oblast Soyuzpechat also cancelled its contract. According to Belarusian law, contract terminations require notices one month in advance. NV's contract with the federal mail service Belpochta, which delivers the newspaper to subscribers, is still valid.

¶ 15. (SBU) Kalinkina believes that the GOB did not expect NV to pay the BYR 100 million fine, especially at such short notice. Only when NV began paying the fine did the authorities get frustrated and resort to annulling all NV's distribution and printing contracts. Lawyer for the Belarusian Association of Journalist Pustakhov told Poloff on September 29 that NV would be able to publish its September 29 and September 30 issues, but would probably be unable to continue with its normal activities in October unless it finds another publisher. Currently, NV is negotiating with other publishing houses, but Kalinkina predicts NV will begin publishing abroad, either in Vilnius or Smolensk.

¶ 16. (SBU) Comment: The court's unexpected and harsh actions towards NV and the simultaneous cancellation of NV contracts with state-controlled companies may indicate that the GOB has initiated a final assault on the few remaining independent newspapers. Narodnaya Volya has been fined and under legal pressure before, but it has always managed to continue its activities. NV probably would have been able to pay the BYR 100 million fine, even with the unexpected bank account and property freeze, but it appears that the authorities are willing to go the extra mile to ensure NV's demise.

¶ 17. (SBU) Comment Cont'd: It is worth noting that several officials in the MFA have told us they read NV and other independent newspapers to stay informed of developments in the opposition camp. We also believe they read the non-state newspapers to receive more objective information. Perhaps the regime has now determined that the perceived political costs associated with keeping a few independent newspapers (barely) alive outweigh the benefits. But as with Belarusian Delovaya Gazeta, NV may still stay alive via publication in Russia.

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